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# Hope is found in this house

## Children's Hope provides sanctuary for families

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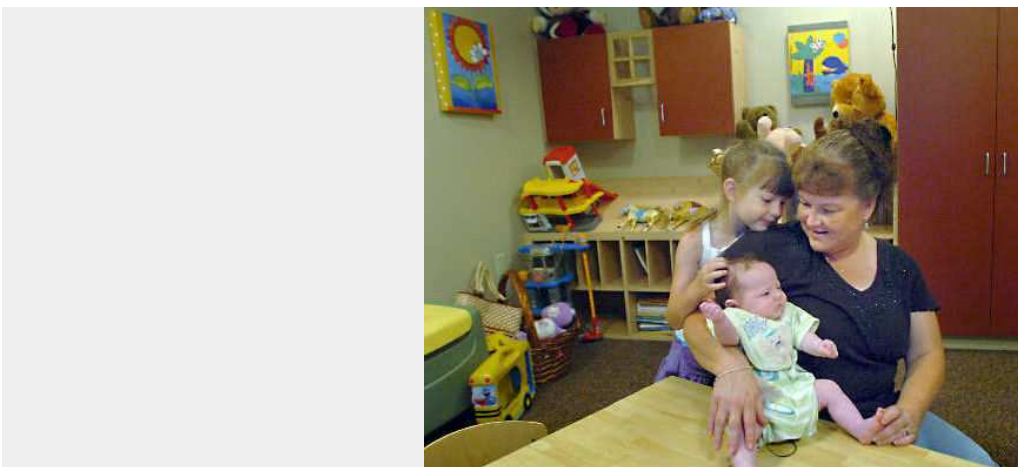
Clint Keller/The Journal Gazette

Matt and Erica Lehman stayed at the Children's Hope House while their daughter, Madison, 5, left, recovered from a car wreck. Erica holds daughter Elizabeth.



Samuel Hoffman/The Journal Gazette

The Mad Anthony's Children's Hope House on the Lutheran Hospital campus. Families of hospitalized children can stay at the Hope House.



Samuel Hoffman/The Journal Gazette

LeaKay Fields-Snyder, 10-week-old son Adam and daughter Cierra, 5, play at the Hope House. Fields-Snyder stayed at the Hope House for four weeks during Adam's medical care.

Beneath the covers that were pulled over her tiny shoulders, the faint figure of a little girl with fine, golden hair was sound asleep in the middle of the double bed in Room 1 of the Mad Anthonys Children's Hope House. Although she was lying on her injured right side, the severe bruises around her closed eye and fractured cheek were still visible, even toward the center of her face. And yet she slept that peaceful child's sleep, without stirring and without pain or fear.

Less than a foot away and sharing the white pillow on which 5-year-old Madison Lehman slept was a stuffed brown bear that had been given to her shortly after she was released from Lutheran Hospital. It would be the first thing she would see when she awoke, and it would be her comfort and companion for the healing days to come.

While the child slept on this bright Monday afternoon, her parents, Erica and Matt, and her grandparents loaded up a car and a van to return to their homes in Warsaw. Erica, and Madison's grandfather, Rick Rapsavage, had spent a fretful two nights in the Hope House doing exactly that – hoping for the best. But with Madison released and Mom and Dad assured by the doctors that she would fully recover, it was time to go back home.

With her face scratched from the Saturday morning car accident that brought them all to Madison's bedside at nearby Lutheran Hospital, Erica Lehman sat in a chair and tried to corral her rambunctious youngest daughter, 1-year-old Elizabeth, who was also a passenger in the car but was uninjured. Erica looked around the room and tried to find a way to say thank you to a place she didn't know about just three days earlier.

"It's for everyone," she said with a tone of disbelief. "And the fact that it's all donated makes it even more amazing. Strangers have given all of this to help people like us."

Thanks to a 10-year commitment by the Mad Anthonys to donate 90 percent of its proceeds from its Charity Classic for Children golf tournament, more and more strangers will be offering more and more money to the Hope House.

The six-bedroom home, with each room containing two beds, a bathroom and the amenities of most hotel rooms, is a haven for both out-of-town and local families who need a place to stay when their child has been hospitalized in need of intensive care and urgent medical attention.

Located at 7922 W. Jefferson Blvd., on the Lutheran campus, the single-story house also has a television room with sofas, oversized chairs and large screen TV, a toy room for visiting small children, a laundry facility, a stocked kitchen and pantry with homemade cookies at the ready, a media room with two computers and a small library of assorted paperbacks and hardbacks.

The 10-year dedication to the Hope House is the longest and will be the most costly commitment to a single charity in the 50-year history of the annual Mad Anthonys tournament, which takes place today. In previous years, proceeds were dispersed to different charitable organizations, such as SCAN and the Red Cedar Center.

And while he was quick to point out that those and other organizations were worthy of the Mad Anthonys' financial assistance, President Mike Thomas said the group was in search of a more tangible, local charity; one that Fort Wayne could see for itself.

"As president of the Mad Anthonys, I was looking for the Mad Anthonys to have more of a brick-and-mortar charity; something that people can get their arms around; something that people could physically see and see it grow, for instance," Thomas said. "As I interviewed different charities, the Children's Hope House became the one that I felt was most important to us.

"Our goal is to raise as much money as humanly possible so that we can get it to grow," he said. "They already have drawings to expand it to more rooms. They turn away a lot of families, and that's the part that really grabbed me. It's great what they're doing for the families they have, but can you imagine getting turned away? That would take you to another level of depression for you at that time in your life.

"That it could grow really, really impressed me. Then we could also start looking in the future of another Hope House in another location. All that seemed like that fit the future of the Mad Anthonys."

If an unexpected fortune would happen to hit Madison Lehman's grandfather, the Mad Anthonys could get beat to the punch.

"If I would ever win a lotto, the first thing I would do is I would donate and build one of these things in our own hometown so people could have the convenience and comfort that we've had over the last few days," Rapsavage said. "If this wouldn't have been here I don't know what we would've done. I just don't know. We were going to sleep in the truck or whatever, my wife and I."

It was a normal Saturday morning grocery run to Wal-Mart for Erica Lehman. She strapped the girls into their car seats in the back of the '97 Pontiac Bonneville; Elizabeth directly behind Erica on the driver's side, and Madison in the back of the passenger's side. With the groceries in the trunk and ready to return home, Erica entered the intersection of Cross and Church streets when an oncoming car slammed into the rear passenger's side. Erica and Elizabeth were jolted and bruised, but because she took most of the force, Madison was injured the worst.

The force of impact caused the groceries in the trunk to all but explode. "My brother got the groceries, and he said that boxes of cereal just blew up and we had Cheerios everywhere," Erica said. "Hot dogs were all over. And the baby stroller in the trunk was crushed."

Madison was rushed to ambulance to Kosciusko County Hospital, where doctors said she had a broken tooth, a concussion and possible facial fractures around her eye socket that might require surgery. The decision was made to transport her to Lutheran Hospital.

When the parents and grandparents convened inside the intensive care waiting room, a nurse inquired about the family. They told her they were from Warsaw and that their little girl was in a car accident and that they didn't know how long she would be in the hospital. They didn't know how long they would have to stay with her. And that's when the nurse pointed them across the parking lot and told them about the Children's Hope House. They could stay there, she said.

" Rapsavage said. "I've never "It's like, 'What? You've got to be kidding?' heard of anything like it."

Many people have.

Since the house opened its doors in December 2003, nearly 950 families from seven states and 26 Indiana counties have benefited from the Hope House. Although executive director Debbie Meyer said the cost to maintain one room for a night is \$95, the Hope House asks for a \$10 donation from the families. If they are unable to pay, Meyer, one of two full-time employees, said she finds a sponsor to cover the expenses. Some families will stay for just a night. Others stay longer. And some stay for what might seem like forever.

When LeaKay Fields-Snyder gave birth to Adam at 3:39 p.m. on April 9 at DeKalb Memorial Hospital, he was a month premature. And although his weight of 5 pounds, 14 ounces wasn't uncommon for a preemie, Adam arrived by Caesarian section with extreme complications.

"His tummy was not connected to his esophagus," Fields-Snyder said. "His stomach was attached to his trachea, so every time he took a breath, besides filling two lungs, he was filling his stomach. About five hours after he was born, he was transferred from Auburn to Lutheran."

But because of the C-section, Fields-Snyder had to stay behind. It was, she says, one of the worst nights of her life.

"It was hard that first night, hearing babies cry and knowing I couldn't be with mine," she said. "You'd hear a baby cry and someone would say (to another mother), 'OK, you want to feed him?' and you knew what they were doing. And I'm wondering if mine's OK because my baby was in a totally different town."

The next day, Fields-Snyder was released from DeKalb Memorial and reunited with her newborn son in Fort Wayne. And just as nurses pointed Madison Lehman's family to the Hope House, they did the same to Fields-Snyder. "They told me not to worry."

The next day, Adam had surgery to attach his esophagus to his stomach. "(Doctors) estimated that he had between 150 and 200 stitches," Fields-Snyder said.

While her husband, Mike, tended to their 5-year-old daughter, Cierra, and adjusted his hours at work to pick her up at her pre-kindergarten school, Fields-Snyder stayed at Adam's bedside from 8 a.m. to 10:45 at night. And when she wasn't there, she was in Room 6 of the Hope House. It would be her home, her sanctuary, for 26 days.

She would get to know the staff of the Hope House, who knew her routine and could read her emotions. She would get to know other families, and they would share their stories and lend support to each other.

"We were all in the same boat," Fields-Snyder said. "We all want our babies home. It was so hard to leave him. There were days when he was hungry and screaming, and what do I do? I take off to go eat. You feel guilty because you're taking off to go eat knowing he's hungry. You come back in tears because you know he's hungry and there's nothing you can do about it. But they tell you that you have to keep your strength up; that you can't take care of him if you're not healthy.

"Thank goodness this place is here," she added. "I don't know how I would have made it. I'm running on steam now (she and Adam returned to Lutheran for a check-up, then stopped in at the Hope House to say hello) and I was running on steam when I was here. But if I had to lay down and take a nap, I had a place to lay down and take a nap."

Debbie Meyer, meanwhile, continues to hold Adam.

She said she worked 20 years in the corporate world, with Lincoln Financial Corp., back when it was called Lincoln Life. She's flown on private jets. She earned a decent salary.

"But after the first two weeks here, it was like, 'Oh my gosh, this is real " Meyer said. stuff,'

"Then somebody will say, 'You've got to do all that fundraising.' I'm doing it for the families that are staying here. That's why I need to go back and write a grant. That's why I need to call a business and ask it for money. That's what gives me the drive to do it – to help the families that are staying here."

And at the moment she says this, you can hear the door to Room 1 open. Madison Lehman and her bear are about to go back home.

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